

# The Reintegration of Professional Football: The 1946 Cleveland Browns

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The reintegration of organized baseball and professional football in 1946 was played out on a very visible stage. Those seasons and the seasons immediately following exploded numerous myths about the character and ability of black people and the acceptance of black people by whites. Also the models and patterns used to integrate sports in 1946 and 1947 were subsequently used in the larger American society following the 1954 Brown decision and the Civil Right Act of the 1960s.

From the founding of the National Football League (NFL) in 1920 through the 1933 season, 13 black men played in the league. Ray Kemp of the Pittsburgh Pirates and Joe Lillard of the Chicago Cardinals were the only black players in 1933. Kemp took a college coaching position in 1934, but as the result of a number of on the field fights involving him, Lillard was not asked to rejoin the Cardinals in 1934. The NFL was segregated from 1934-1945.

Four black players: Ken Washington and Woody Strode of the NFL's Los Angeles Rams and Bill Willis and Marion Motley of the All American Football Conference's (AAFC) Cleveland Browns, reintegrated professional football in 1946. Willis and Motley faced minor on the field problems mostly related to "name calling." But both reported strong support from their teammates. The only major controversy was the law in Miami, Florida, the home of the AAFC Seahawks, which prohibited integrated sports. Motley reported receiving a letter with death threats. Coach Paul Brown decided to avoid problems by leaving Motley and Willis in Cleveland.

The Browns dominated the AAFC with a 12-2 record and defeated the New York Yankees 14-9 for the AAFC championship. Both Willis and Motley were named to the All-AAFC team. The Browns also established a home attendance record with an average of 57,000 a game (NFL average 31,000). The Browns went on to win a total of five straight league championships using black players. Both Willis and Motley were subsequently inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame for their outstanding play.

The success of the Browns using black players, the success of Willis and Motley on the field, the support of Coach Brown, their teammates and fans all contributed to encouraging other teams to sign black players.

Full integration proceeded slowly. In 1950 only 6 of the 13 NFL teams had a total of 11 black players. But by 1953 all of the NFL teams were integrated with the exception of the Washington Redskins. The full integration of professional football was completed in 1962 when the Redskins added Bob Mitchell and Ron Hatcher to their roster.